





"THE LORD IS AT HAND."

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT

S. Peter's Chapel, Charlotte Street, Pimlico,

ON FRIDAY, 14th DECEMBER, 1852.

BY THE

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“THE LORD IS AT HAND.”

WE are now arriving at the close of the Season of Advent; next Sunday will be the fourth time that the Church sounds in our ears the warning of the text that “The LORD is at hand,” tells us of the first coming of our LORD,—reminds us of the duties which that first Advent imposed upon us,—tells us of the Judge who in His second Advent will try us by the duties of the first, and will reward us according to our faithful discharge of them, or punish us according to our faithless neglect of them. But the Church has not only pointed out our duties—it has shown us the means for performing them, which CHRIST has given us. In the three weeks of Advent that have passed, we have been called upon first to meditate on the future coming of our Judge,—then to study the Scriptures,—then to avail ourselves of the Ministers whom our LORD has left to represent Him: and I trust that during the time it has lasted we have been endeavouring

to improve ourselves and to prepare for our LORD's second coming, by following out the course of prayer, meditation, and study, pointed out by the Church. I trust that during the first week we have been thinking how terrible a thing it would be, were we called upon before next Christmas, actually to meet our Judge. I trust we have considered how utterly unprepared we are, most of us at least, if not all of us, to answer to the things written in the book. I trust that seeing our unprepared state, we during that week did firmly resolve to learn what the LORD's will is, and to do it,—that we called to mind how we were CHRIST's sworn soldiers and servants, and determined to act according to the promise made at our baptism. During the second week I trust that, seeing how wretchedly unprepared we were, we did seriously set to work in the way the Church then pointed out, to bring us back to our duty,—that remembering we had promised in our baptism to believe the Articles of the Christian faith, and to keep God's holy will, we did proceed to search the book from which that creed and those commandments were taken,—I mean the blessed Scriptures which God has caused to be written for our learning—and that during that week we did really “read them, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them.”

Did any of you on considering the requirements which in the second week you found in the Scripture with the actual deeds of your lives, and seeing the vast difference between them, bethink yourselves, that the LORD “who at His first coming did send His Messenger to prepare His way before Him,” has sent to you “Ministers

and Stewards of His mysteries ” for the express purpose of preparing and making ready His way at His second coming? Did you quiet your own consciences by the study of the Scriptures and the meditation of your own shortcomings? and if you did not come to those who are over you in the LORD and “open your grief” did you “receive the benefit of Absolution to the quieting of your conscience and the removal of all scruple, and doubtfulness?” I trust, however, that you did consider what a blessed thing it was to have an appointed minister whose special duty it was to explain that Word to the ignorant, and to read it to those who cannot read for themselves, and to teach it to those who are ready to learn,—to lead the prayers of those who wish to pray, to strengthen with CHRIST’S body and blood those who are weak, to carry to the penitent their SAVIOUR’S forgiveness, and to bring to all the peace of GOD that passeth all understanding; and feeling this, I trust you did join heartily in the prayer to the LORD of the harvest, that “He would send labourers into His harvest,” and that He would “so guide the minds of the Bishops and Pastors of the flock, that they might make choice of fit persons to serve in the sacred ministry of the Church;” for you must have known well enough that at the time when ministers were even more wanted than they are now, CHRIST never sent them unasked, but told the people who wanted them—“pray ye the LORD of the harvest, that He would send labourers into His harvest.”

These have been our Advent lessons hitherto, and very good and useful lessons they are, and if we have

profited by them, and have learnt to prepare ourselves for the coming of our LORD by means of His Scriptures and His ministers, we have got a good way on our road to Heaven; but all these lessons, good and useful as they are, would be like an arch without a keystone, were it not for the lesson of this next week. It is a lesson you are taught frequently in a general manner, but the last week in Advent applies it more particularly to the two subjects we have been considering during the two last weeks. The lesson in a general way is, "that without CHRIST, we can do nothing;" but the particular lesson which this next week teaches us at this particular season, and in connection with the special doctrine of the season is that without His special grace, neither His blessed Scriptures, nor His faithful ministers can do anything; that though the race is set before us, that is, though both the Scriptures and the ministers do point out our way very plainly, yet that we are ourselves so let and hindered from following it, and that too by our sins and our own wickedness, that unless the LORD Himself raise up His power and come among us and with great might succour us, it is no use to set before us His way, for we cannot follow it.

Now, this, I am afraid, must be plain enough to anybody: they must see by their own conduct that they do not act up to even what they know, and though the Scripture warns them, and their minister calls out to them, and they feel and know in their own hearts, that both God's Word and God's servants do speak the plain truth, yet that they do not act up to that

which they see is necessary for their salvation. I think this must be plain to all, yet as it will be satisfactory to see that God has foreseen and foretold that it will be so, I will point out two passages where the very thing is spoken of. You must all remember the parable of the sower; you must also recollect that all the seed that he sowed was good, just as all the Word of God is good, but that the good seed produced a very different crop according to the place where it fell, the way side or the hardened hearts, where it never came up at all, and the stony ground where it sprung up directly, and never had depth of soil enough, that is, depth of principle enough to come to anything—and the thorny ground, that is, the worldly minds where there were so many weeds, that the good seed got choked—as well as the good ground, where that very same seed produced its crop—and even that crop was not all alike, but some thirty fold and some sixty fold and some a hundred fold. The goodness of the seed alone, then, is not sufficient, even though that seed be the Word of God. Nor is the faithfulness and painstaking of the minister sufficient, for who could be more painstaking and more faithful than S. Paul, and who turned so many to the fold of CHRIST?—yet we cannot read a chapter in the Acts without seeing that if there were many who were converted by his ministry, still there were many who were not, and we cannot say that he did not labour for the one as well as the other. It is not the faithfulness of the minister that will avail. No doubt, if there were no seed and no sower there would be no crop—if we do not take the outward means,

we shall stand no more chance of bringing forth good works or of going to Heaven, than a field would stand a chance of bearing a crop of wheat were we never to sow it—but good seed and good farming alone is not enough; no crop will come up without the dew and the rain and the sun from Heaven.

Now why should this be so?—I do not mean in our fields—we should never think of asking such a question about them—we should say, it is the nature of the seed to want the warmth and moisture, and we should be quite satisfied; but why is it so with the hearts of men? why will not the study of God's Word and good explanation from men who are authorised to explain it, make us good men?—we see it does not—but we want to know why—we think it ought.

Perhaps the Gospel and the Epistle for this day will explain this to us, to show us why it is consistent with God's way of governing our hearts, to teach us that something more is necessary. You know how God hates self-righteousness and self-confidence, and what we should call conceit; in fact, that nothing does let and hinder us in our way to Heaven so much. The Parable of the Pharisee and Publican would show you that, even if our SAVIOUR's words and S. Paul's cautions, "not to be high-minded," "if we think we stand, to take heed lest we fall," and a thousand such were all blotted out of the Bible.

Now, suppose a man had worked out for himself a line of conduct from the Bible, by mere intellect and scholarship without prayer or help from the Sacraments, or from God's ministers, or His ordinances, or anything

He has commanded us to hallow, what would be the result? would he not be puffed up in his own conceit? would not his own ingenuity blind his eyes to his SAVIOUR and make him think he had saved himself? or suppose the people were all at once to be turned by the voice of the minister; suppose they were at once to give ear, not only to see their errors and to be turned from them, but joyfully and eagerly to follow out that good path which their parson was tracing out for them; always coming to Church because he told them not to forsake the assembling of themselves together; always seeking the blessed Sacraments, because he considered that they were the true bread of life, and the true water of purification: suppose all this were the case, no doubt it would be a blessed thing for the people, but what a trial would it be for the minister; a trial that even Moses the meekest of men could not bear. If even Moses and Aaron the Saint of the LORD, spake unadvisedly with their lips, and gave not GOD the glory, but said, "Hear now, ye rebels, must we fetch you water out of this rock?" whereas it was GOD Who brought it by their means; how much more likely should we be—we, to whom GOD has given so much better a commission and a stewardship so much higher—how much more likely should we be to say or think: Do you expect us to forgive you your sins, or give you the Body and Blood of CHRIST, or bring you the peace of GOD which passeth all understanding; whereas we are but the messengers, who carry the word of the LORD, and merely the stewards, or keepers of our Master's Sacraments:

and thus it is that we tell you, over and over again the word of life ; we exhort you to keep from such and such sins ; we invite you to come to Church ; we tell you, over and over again, that " he that eateth not this bread, hath no life in him." And it all seems of no use : people will not come to Church ; people will go on in their sins, though they know better all the time men will lounge about in unseemly postures ; half the congregation, time after time, turn their backs on the LORD's table, and the LORD's Minister, who invite them to the Marriage Feast. And then that Minister begins to think his labour is in vain, when, all at once our Blessed SAVIOUR raises up His might, and comes among us. The good seed is already sown, but has lain parching for want of the dews from heaven. " Thou sentest a gracious rain upon Thine inheritance and refreshedst it when it was weary." The crop springs up ; the fields are green ; " the wilderness becomes standing water, and the desert blooms like the rose : " and then it is that we all see and acknowledge that " Paul must plant, and Apollos must water," and then after all this, " it is God Who giveth the increase." We think this is the lesson taught in the Gospel for this day, when we compare it with the Gospel of last Sunday. Both these passages treat of John the Baptist. In the former, the Gospel of last Sunday, CHRIST holds him out as the model and type of what His messenger ought to be, " that he was no reed shaken by the wind," that is, no doubtful, faint-hearted, hesitating man : no nor a man clothed in soft raiment—no proud, self-seeking, luxurious man.—but that he was a prophet. " yea

say unto you, and more than a prophet," for he was the very messenger of the covenant.

This was our SAVIOUR's testimony of John. But what was John's testimony concerning himself? Well might he have been proud at being greater than any born of woman; well might he have been proud at the numbers that flocked to him in the wilderness, confessing their sins, and coming to him to have them washed away in baptism; well might he have thought highly of himself, when our Blessed SAVIOUR Himself came to be baptized of him, and when the Priests and Levites, wondering at his power, came all the way from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who art thou?" And what said that type of CHRIST's Ministers? "He confessed, and denied not, but confessed, 'I am not the CHRIST.' And they asked him, 'What then; art thou Elias?' and he saith, 'I am not.' 'Art thou that prophet?' and he answered, 'No.' Then said they unto him, 'Who art thou, that we may give an answer to them that sent us? What sayest thou of thyself?' Then said he unto them, 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, I am but the Messenger, I am but the voice. There is one among you Whom ye know not,'" (and what words are these to us, who ought to know "that where two or three are gathered together in His name, there is He in the midst of them," and find like the Patriarch Jacob, "verily the LORD was in this place, and I knew it not;") "there is one among you Whom ye know not, the latchet of Whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose."

Now, then, comes the Epistle. If you wonder that such great power should be given unto man,—if you

are surprised at what the Church told you last Sunday that the LORD has given power unto men, such as belong to GOD alone,—to forgive sins; to impart, by the Sacraments, strengthening grace; to convey the peace of GOD, which passeth all understanding; learn that this is, after all, but the voice—but the messenger—that there is one among you Whom ye know not “the latchet of Whose shoes these men are not worthy to unloose.” The LORD has raised up His power, and is now among us, and is ready with great might to succour us: should we not, therefore, in the words of that Apostle, “rejoice in the LORD always, and again I say rejoice?” Have we not reason to be glad that so great salvation is prepared for us? If that is the case,—if you have a due sense of these blessings,—then, in the words of that same Apostle, “let your moderation be known to all men.” You will not see the meaning of this at first, because the word “moderation,” like the words “let,” and “offend,” is used in this passage in a sense different from that which the word bears at present. We shall understand it better by examining the passage of the Apocrypha to which S. Paul was alluding where the same word occurs, and is translated “patience.” The verse is in Wisdom ii., verses 18, 19 “If the just man be the son of GOD, He will help him and deliver him from the hand of his enemies. Let us examine him with despitefulness and torture, that we may know his patience.” The words mean, then “be witnesses to all men that you, at least, believe in the Son of GOD, and on His power to help and deliver by your moderation:” that is to say,—“your na-

ience under all that He is pleased to lay upon you." Therefore says S. Paul, "let your patience be known to all men, because the LORD, (called in the Apocrypha the Son of God,) is at hand." Surely people who thought the LORD was at hand would be careful for nothing: that is to say, they would not be full of cares about any earthly thing, but would at once make their requests known to Him Whom they believed to have come among them; and even while they were praying about their misfortunes and wants, it would be "with thanksgiving" because their LORD was at hand to hear them. And if this were the constant habit of our minds, should we not possess such peace as no one who has not tried it can understand, keeping our hearts and minds through CHRIST JESUS?

The very circumstance of our not being able to help ourselves, which is the peculiar lesson which the next Advent week teaches, is the very thing that will, when rightly understood, take away our cares, and give us peace. CHRIST has not told us this before He has raised up His might and come among us: He took our nature upon Him, that we might be strengthened by His nature, and became the Son of Man, that we might become the sons of GOD. But at the very same time that He cuts away all our trust in our human nature, at that very time He brings us into communion with Himself; He strengthens and refreshes our souls by His own body and blood: He dwells in us; and, at the very time when we have discovered that without Him we can do nothing, we find also that we can do all things through Him that strengtheneth us.

You know that this year between the last Sunday in Advent and Christmas Day comes S. Thomas's Day. Now, can any one imagine why the Church placed S. Thomas's Day just before Christmas? What was S. Thomas most remarkable for? Was it not that he doubted about the LORD's body after His resurrection, and said that unless he could touch it, and handle it, and perceive it with his senses, he would not believe. And does not the Church say in the Collect that this was permitted by our LORD for the more confirmation of our faith? And does not S. Paul tell the Corinthians that those who do not discern the LORD's body—that is, discover or find it out under the visible sign of the bread and wine, do eat and drink damnation to themselves? And does not the Church take up the very same words in the Exhortation at the Communion. And do you think,—do you discern or find out the LORD's body in the bread and wine when, as soon as you see it put upon the table, you turn away from it and begin to go, one to his farm, and another to his merchandise?

Till within the last hundred years or so, those who did not partake of the Holy Communion on the three great festivals, of which Christmas is the first that comes, and within eight days after them, being able to do so, were held to be excommunicated. Depend upon it, there is no better touchstone for our consciences; there is no way in which a man is more completely forced into judging himself, and ascertaining whether he is or is not fit for the Second Advent, than by being called upon to come to the Holy Communion. "When ye should return to

God," says the Exhortation, (that is to say, when you are to meet God face to face,) "will you say that you are not ready?" When next Sunday you are summoned to attend the Holy Communion of Christmas, and you find yourselves either careless about it, or shrinking from it, you have already judged yourselves : you have already determined that your lives here on earth are not such as will bear the searching eye of your Judge, because they will not bear even your own. If, on the other hand, you are careless about the means of communion with your LORD on earth, you have already determined that you are not anxious for communion with Him in heaven. Depend upon this, whether you turn away from that communion, or whether you receive that summons without joy, your own judgment of yourself is the same—you do not discern the LORD's body; you do not believe His word, which promises, that they who eat Him shall live by Him; you have no faith, and without faith it is impossible to please God.

Can you see no reason, then, why this very example of want of faith in the LORD's body should be placed where it is? why we should be just now taught to pray "that we may so perfectly, and without all doubt believe in the LORD JESUS CHRIST, that our faith, in His sight, may never be reprov'd;" and be found to hear our blessed LORD's reproof and encouragement, "Thomas! because thou hast seen Me, thou hast believed; blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." We cannot see our LORD's body now: let us feel after Him, if haply we may find Him: for depend upon it, if we seek Him, He is not far from any of us.

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